

# Did the Establishment of the UN in 1945 Really Mark a New Era in the Collective Security System?

*Josh Gartland*

---

Whether the establishment of the UN marked a new era in the collective security system is debatable. Unlike its predecessor, the League of Nations, the organisation is near-universal, has access to peacekeeping forces and tough sanctions, emphasises individual as well as national sovereignty and its Security Council can issue binding resolutions. Yet the UN represents an uneasy cohabitation of liberal universality and realist great power consensus and has been, for much its history, paralysed by superpower rivalry – leaving the maintenance of a precarious peace to global defensive alliances and the threat of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD). Nevertheless, since the end of the Cold War, the actions of the UN, though often disappointing, could be said to represent a new era of humanitarian collective security – by surviving, the foundation of the UN in 1945 arguably marked a new, but nascent, era in the collective security system.

Although comprising only 51 nations at its foundation, with membership open to any ‘peace-loving’ sovereign nation (Article 4, UN Charter), the current 192-member UN arguably possesses a universality, and hence moral authority (indeed, that the UN is the first collective security organisation in which the USA has taken part itself represents a new era in the collective security system), that the League never did. The absence of the US and the initial exclusion of Germany and the USSR deeply undermined the earlier organisation’s potential (Oppenheim 1919:vii), while the complex admittance process, requiring a two-thirds Assembly majority (Duffy 1950:168), probably deterred new members and resulted in

a closed shop lacking broad international authority. The UN's moral authority has its benefits; it arguably encourages the contribution of financial and human resources by member-states as a self interested means of flaunting their responsible humanitarian credentials (Taylor and Curtis 2001:412) and enhancing their influence (Hurd 1999:385), in a rational choice institutionalist fashion; something that no significant states ever did in the League – often regarded as an Anglo-French talking shop. Another revolutionary aspect of the UN is its comprehensive articulation of International Law, notably Article 2(4), which, for the first time in the history of collective security, prohibits force or the threat of force (UN Charter), in contrast to the League, which merely placed limitations upon the conditions of conflict initiation (Article 12, League Covenant).

Nevertheless, there are key similarities between the League and the UN that cast such revolutionary assertions into doubt; indeed it should not be forgotten that much of the League's bureaucracy and many of its institutions were simply transferred to UN jurisdiction after the Second World War. Article 2(1) professes that the UN is based on the 'principle of sovereign equality of all its Members', yet the UN maintains the League's hierarchical division between the Security Council and Assembly (UN Charter). Furthermore, while Assembly unanimity is not required for resolutions (as in the League), Security Council consensus is, rendering the issue of a UN resolution against any of the five permanent members almost impossible. As Barnett notes, the presence of *states* on the Council arguably results in an unhelpful struggle between member-state interests and international obligations (1997:571), in a manifestation of the realist-liberal struggle also expressed by the existence of both a Council and an Assembly and dating back to the League's formation (Oppenheim 1919:44). As Hurd points out, international rules gain legitimacy from their

acceptance; the law becomes authoritative, and thus the realist conception of an anarchical international system is undermined (1999:381). In such a situation, surely the Assembly, as a truly universal body, should take precedence. The continued existence of privileged Council seats is an institution that is arguably detrimental to the functionality of the UN and simply provides opportunity for the permanent five to ignore the legitimacy of international law (Campbell 1974:558).

Indeed, UN action against the numerous counts of aggression perpetrated by the Superpowers, involving Vietnam, Afghanistan, Grenada, Libya and, most recently, Iraq, has been repeatedly vetoed. However, it is arguably not just with regards to the major powers that the UN is unsuccessful. Wilkenfield and Brecher assess that from 1945-1975, the UN became involved in 59% of international crises and was responsible for crisis abatement in just 18% (1984:49) – arguably an impotence reminiscent of that of the League. Nevertheless, on occasion the UN has been able to penalise even Security Council members. During the Suez Crisis for example, although French and British vetoes prevented any Council resolution, Assembly Resolution 1001, which called for an immediate ceasefire, subjected the perpetrators to enormous international pressure. Additionally, the UN provided a useful organising point for collective action against Anglo-French aggression, including the threat of American, Saudi and NATO sanctions (Hinchcliffe 2006:12).

Like the League however, the UN possesses no standing army under supranational command, largely due to post-war superpower suspicion (Taylor and Curtis 2001:412). Nevertheless, the Council can draw on forces from member-states, in accordance with Articles 43(1) and 45, which make clear that member-states are obligated to contribute as and when required as well as hold immediately available air contingents for international

action (UN Charter); a clear step-up from what the League could manage, where British and French reluctance to commit effectively neutered the enactment of any collective military action (Taylor, A. 1961:66). Also, article 42 of the UN Charter effectively states that the Council may, upon the failure of non-military pressure, use all military means necessary to restore international peace and security (UN Charter). On occasion states have sometimes been authorised to use all necessary means to preserve peace – seen as a legitimate application of chapter VII powers (Taylor and Curtis 2001:409). Crucially, the UN Security Council is able to issue binding resolutions, in contrast to the optional recommendations of the League. It has been stated that military crisis management techniques were employed in 75% of effective UN actions from 1945-1975 (Wilkenfield and Brecher 1984:56), suggesting that the militarisation of collective security has been key to the UN's relative success. Finally, the universality of the UN imbues the organisation with unparalleled economic muscle, in contrast to the League where American absence rendered any League-effected sanctions by-passable. On this evidence it seems clear that the UN is possessed of considerably more coercive power than the League, and thus arguably represents a new era in the collective security system.

The success of the UN could be measured by the fact that a global conflict has not broken out since the Second World War, despite the global rivalry of two nuclear-armed blocs. Arguably, however, peace was maintained because of, not despite, the broad defensive alliances of NATO and the Warsaw Pact, coupled with the threat of Mutually Assured Destruction. It could be forwarded that the founding of NATO, by facilitating the delegation of global conflict to war by proxy, represented a greater shift in the collective security

system than the creation of another sub-optimal collective security organisation paralysed by great power rivalry.

However, the UN's recent 'multidimensional peacekeeping' approach, whereby intra-state conflicts and humanitarian emergencies are viewed as threats to peace, arguably has represented a new era of interventionist collective security (Taylor and Curtis 2001:412). Although it is true that during the Cold War American and Soviet vetoes prevented intervention in states' domestic affairs, the very existence of the 1948 UN Declaration on Human Rights arguably heralded a marked change of direction, if only in theory. Since the end of the Cold War, the UN has become increasingly concerned with humanitarian issues and intra-state conflict, with former Secretary General Kofi Annan arguing that states have a responsibility to protect their citizens, but that in the event of failure that responsibility must be borne by the broader international community (Taylor and Curtis 2001:415).

The UN's record on this point is mixed however, for example with regards to the arguable indifference shown by the UN to the mass slaughter of Rwandan Tutsis by the Hutu government, with no state willing to commit troops to a renewed UNAMIR taskforce (Barnett 1997:572). This indifference to human suffering is also apparent in the UN's casual implementation of trade sanctions in the aftermath of the first Gulf War, resulting in the deaths of almost 500 000 Iraqi children (Ali, Blacker and Jones 2003:225). Indeed, Barnett, a former political officer at the US mission to the UN assigned to cover Rwanda, suggests that the Security Council, sensitive to any potential damage to the UN's reputation, has reflexively reverted to brutal neo-realist doctrine; that catastrophe is acceptable if the alternative is to harm the future of the UN (1997:579).

To conclude, the norms expressed in the UN Charter could well have marked a new, liberal era of international security. Superpower rivalry, however, arguably precipitated a return to realist power politics, dictated less by international negotiation than raw military power. Nevertheless, in recent years the liberal aspect of the UN has arguably returned to the fore, with an emphasis on individual sovereignty now permeating collective security considerations. Still, the inaction of the UN with regards to recent events continues to cast doubt on the UN's capability to effectively preserve peace.

## **Bibliography**

Ali, M., Blacker, J. & Jones, G., July 2003. Annual Mortality Rates and Excess Deaths of Children under Five in Iraq, 1991-98. *Population Studies*, 57(2), pp.217-226

Barnett, M., Nov. 1997. The UN Security Council, Indifference, and Genocide in Rwanda. *Cultural Anthropology*, 12(4), pp.551-578

Campbell, T., 1974. US Motives in the Veto Power. *International Organization*, 28(3), pp.557-560

Duffy, C., Apr. 1950. The League of Nations. *The Irish Monthly*, 78(922), pp.166-174

Hinchcliffe, P., Jun. 2006. Ballykinlar to Suez. *Fortnight*, 1(445), pp.12-13

Hurd, I., 1999. Legitimacy and Authority in International Politics. *International Organization*, 53(2), pp.379-408

Oppenheim, L., 1919. *The League of nations and its Problems*. London: Longmans, Green and Co.

Taylor, A.J.P., 1961. *The Origins of the Second World War*, New York: Touchstone

Taylor, P. & Curtis, D., 2001. The United Nations. In Baylis, J. and Smith, S., ed., 2005. *The Globalisation of World Politics*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press

The Avalon Project, 2008. *The Covenant of the League of Nations*. Available at: [http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th\\_century/leagcov.asp](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/leagcov.asp) [Accessed: 15 March 2010]

United Nations Organization. *Charter of the United Nations*. Available at: <http://www.un.org/en/documents/charter/> [Accessed: 29 February 2010]

Wilkenfield, J. & Brecher, M., Mar. 1984. International Crises, 1945-1975: The UN Dimension. *International Studies Quarterly*, 28(1), pp.45-67